

Leading and Following: Joshua 1:10-18

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Sunday, February 15th, 2015

We've started into our study of the Old Testament book of Joshua. I started with an overview of the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of the Bible). And then last week I talked about Moses' legacy and Joshua's leadership. This book opens with the very weighty news that Moses is dead. So the Israelites are in the midst of a major transition here. They have lost their great leader, the one whom God used to bring them out of slavery in Egypt. And now it's time for a new leader to step up. That leader is Joshua.

I mentioned a few things last week about Joshua. First, his name. He is first called Hoshea, which means "salvation." And then Moses calls him Joshua, which means more specifically "Yawheh saves," "The Lord saves." And in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Hebrew name Joshua is rendered Iesous in Greek, which is the same word for the name Jesus. Joshua, imperfect as he is, points us to Jesus Christ. He is the Lord who saves.

I also talked about Joshua's preparation. He had been there alongside Moses for many years, learning, growing, being prepared for the time when he would eventually step into the top leadership role.

We also saw that Joshua was a man filled with the Spirit. And he was a man of faith and a man of obedience. By God's grace, by the power of the Spirit, he was a man who firmly believed the promises of God, and therefore he was willing to step out to do risky things which God called him to do.

That's what is taking place in the first part of Joshua 1. The Lord is speaking to Joshua, telling him 3 times to be strong and courageous. Why do you think the Lord is telling him that? Because it's going to take a lot of strength and a lot of courage to do what he's about to do. And I love how verse 9 ends, "Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

This morning we're going to talk about leading and following from this passage which is the second half of Joshua 1.

Now Joshua officially assumes the role of Israel's leader, and we're going to see the Israelites voicing their commitment to follow. So let's think about leading, and then following, and I'll

conclude the sermon with a word about the Lord giving rest to His people.

Leading with Faith

The first thing we should notice about Joshua's leadership in verses 10 and following is that he leads with faith. His actions, his leadership, gives evidence of believing God's Word. And therefore he's going to obey God's Word.

In verse 2, right after the announcement that Moses is dead, the Lord tells Joshua, "Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them . . ." Joshua believed that God was, in fact, going to give them this land. So now he commands the officers of the people to go through the camp and tell everyone to get ready.

Now, there's something interesting about these instructions. Not so much what he says, but what he doesn't say. The message he passes along to the people is, "Prepare your provisions." That is, get your food together, your supplies . . . But what would be the big question looming in your mind if you heard the announcement that in three days you would be going to the other side of the Jordan River?

We're told in Joshua 3:15 that at this time of year the Jordan overflows its banks. The Jordan River is not a massive river normally. But this time of year it would have been daunting to cross, especially with luggage and kids. So it seems the elephant in the room would have been, "Well, how do you think we're going to get across that river?"

Joshua simply tells them to get their food and luggage together. What he doesn't say, what we might expect him to say, is, "Get some materials together to build a bridge, or a bunch of boats, or something that's going to get all of us across that river."

Here we see Joshua's faith. He trusts that the Lord is going to get them across that river. After all, Joshua was there when they crossed the Red Sea 40 years earlier. He witnessed the miracle of the water standing up like 2 walls on either side of them as they walked through on dry ground.

Joshua knew that the Lord could do that for them again. The Lord had promised to take them into the land, and Joshua was leading the people by faith, leading them to do what God had told them to do.

Leading in Unity

There's an important thing going on in verses 12-15. We need to understand what's happening here. And to do so, we need to go back to Numbers 32 where the tribes of Reuben and Gad, and toward the end of Numbers 32 also the half-tribe of Manasseh, all settled in the land east of the Jordan River. That is to say, not technically in the Promised Land.

What we read in Numbers 32 (and I'll summarize it for you) is that the people of Reuben and Gad had a lot of livestock. And this land on the east side of the Jordan was good for raising livestock. So these tribes came to Moses and asked if they could settle there. They said, We don't want to live across the Jordan. We want to live here.

Initially Moses took that as a blatant act of disobedience and rebellion. This sounded to him to be the same as those previously who refused to go into the Promised Land.

But then these tribes said, Oh don't misunderstand us! We will go into the land and fight alongside our brothers in order to take over the land. But then we want to come back and live here east of the Jordan. And Moses agreed, as long as they followed through on what they were promising. He warned them that if they would not fight alongside their brothers, then they would be sinning against the Lord and their sin would find them out.

In our passage for this morning in Joshua 1, we see that among Joshua's very first actions as the commander in chief is to rally these troops from Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh.

Read verses 13-15

“this land,” that is the land east of the Jordan. Notice that it's the men who will go to fight. The women and children will not be involved in the physical warfare. They'll stay at home and wait for the men to return.

Notice also that it's the soldiers from these 2 and a half tribes who lead the charge. This is what they promised in Numbers 32, that they would go before the people, to bring them into their place (Numbers 32:17). And here in Joshua 1:14, Joshua tells them “all the men of valor among you shall pass over armed before your brothers and shall help them . . .”

In chapter 4:12 we read that this is, in fact, what happened.

“The sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh passed over armed before the people of Israel, as Moses had told them.” (Joshua 4:12, ESV)

I think there’s a good application point to be drawn from this about the unity of God’s people and our obligation to labor and fight alongside one another, even if it’s not for something that’s going to directly benefit us.

The tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh were not fighting for a land they, themselves, were going to inhabit. But they were going to fight for a land which their kinsmen were going to inhabit. Due to their unity as a people, they were willing to risk their lives for this cause. They were willing to risk their lives to do what God had called them to do, what God had called all His people to do.

The Great Commission is something that all of God’s people in our day have been called to participate in. Jesus told His disciples about 2000 years ago—and this applies to every subsequent generation of Christians, including us—

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18–20, ESV)

We’re not in a physical battle, like the Israelites were in. We need to be very clear about that. Paul is clear about that in Ephesians 6 that

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12, ESV)

My point, though, is that we are in a battle. We have been sent on a mission. And God’s people should be united in pursuing this mission. I know this brings up a host of complicated questions. And I’m not planning to get into a detailed discussion here about who we should cooperate with and who we shouldn’t cooperate with, based on how like-minded an individual or organization is. We certainly do need to be discerning and prayerful in these questions.

But it seems to me that many Christians are overly focused on promoting only their own ministry, their own church, their own mission group, or only those associated with an identical set of theological convictions. I’m not saying we shouldn’t promote our

own ministries and missionaries, our own church, or our theological convictions. But what I do want to say is that we should open up our eyes to see what other believers are doing in our city, country, and world, and we should be excited to labor alongside them—not competing with them, but united with them in the same mission.

Let me mention two specific things that come to mind.

Overseas Missions

One is our support of overseas missionaries. In our annual budget we designate funds toward specific missionaries as well as the Cooperative Program of the Southern Baptist Convention, which supports the International Mission Board. There's also the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering that we highlighted in December. We talk about this every December. It's an offering that is collected to support the close to 5,000 missionaries working with the International Mission Board all over the world, including our good friend Stephen and Sarah and their family who now live in the Middle East. We also just approved last month several one-time gifts to missionaries.

When we as a church, or when we as individuals, give to overseas missionaries, we might wonder, "Well what benefit is that going to bring to our church here in Pittsburgh?" Or when we spend the big bucks to buy plane tickets to other parts of the world in order to help missionaries and participate in the work of international missions, we might ask, "Wouldn't our money and our effort be more effective right here?" Sometimes those are difficult questions.

But the point is, we're united to the rest of God's people, and we're united in this calling upon us all to take the Gospel to all the nations. And therefore we're obligated—joyfully obligated—to support world-wide evangelism. It's not going to directly result in conversions here, or church growth here. But we are united with our brothers and sisters in Christ in this mission.

Church Planting

A second thing that comes to mind is church planting, specifically thinking of our church planting here in our own region. This might be even harder. Because not only is it difficult to see how this would benefit our congregation, it may appear actually to have an adverse effect on our congregation.

If we're really going to support church planting in this region (which we are planning to do and are taking intentional

steps toward this), it's going to involve releasing some of our most gifted people. That's going to hurt. We'll miss those folks. We'll notice their absence. It will be a sacrifice. But it's necessary because we're part of a bigger mission. We're not just about advancing our own little agenda here. We're not just about growing our influence and increasing our numbers and making things more convenient or comfortable for us. Our unity with the broader people of God causes us to cooperate with others in the mission to which we've all been called.

Following

We've looked at Joshua's leadership. He led with faith. He led in unity. Now let's talk about following. Clearly, Joshua is now Israel's leader. How does Israel respond to his leadership at the end of this chapter?

Read 1:16-18

The pronoun "they" in verse 16 could be referring to the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh. But it seems more likely that this is the entire group of officers mentioned in verse 10. Joshua has given instructions to all of the officers of the people. Then he gave instructions to the 2 and a half tribes. Now they are all responding with this pledge of obedience.

Let's look at this first of all, appreciating their sincere desire to follow Joshua's leadership. And then we'll look at this with some realism as well and acknowledge that they didn't follow through on all that they said here.

We can appreciate—I'm sure Joshua appreciated—their very supportive words. Joshua is now in charge. He's exercising his leadership role for the first time here. And I imagine he was wondering how the people would respond. Would they say, "Who do you think you are, telling us what to do? Moses is no longer around, we'll do whatever we want!" Would they try to put a different leader in place? Would they grumble and complain? What was going to happen? I'm sure Joshua was relieved and encouraged to hear these words.

Obedience

First of all, they agreed to do everything Joshua told them to do. They promised to obey. And they acknowledge the transition from Moses to Joshua. Verse 17, "Just as we obeyed Moses in all things, so we will obey you."

Prayer

Second, they voiced a prayer for Joshua. In the second half of verse 17, “Only may the Lord your God be with you, as he was with Moses!” That’s a great prayer! It’s praying according to the promises of God. In the middle of verse 5 the Lord promised Joshua this very thing. “Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you.” These officers of the people of Israel pray publically that God will do what He has promised to do. We can pray with great confidence when we pray this way, because we know that God will keep His promises.

And what an encouragement this would be for Joshua. The Lord has promised to be with him, and now he hears that the people desire this for him as well. In a sense they’re saying, We’ll follow you as you follow the Lord. And that’s a healthy place for any leader to be. And a healthy place for the followers to be. Nobody should follow a leader into sin, into anything that would be contrary to the Lord’s instruction.

But our prayer is: Oh, may the Lord be with these leaders, guiding them in all truth and purity and godliness. And as God directs the leaders, then others can joyfully and confidently follow.

Accountability

Another thing these officers do is set up an accountability system. What they’re saying is, We’re not only going to obey you, ourselves. We’re also going to make sure the rest of the people obey you. And this is serious, too.

Verse 18

That’s how seriously they considered disobedience. If someone refused to obey the Lord’s commands coming through Joshua, then the disobedient person would need to be cut off from the people by being put to death.

As we think about this for our own context, it’s similar to what I said earlier about physical warfare and spiritual warfare. The church is not in a battle of swords or guns. We’re in a spiritual battle. Our defense is the shield of faith and our weapon is the Word of God.

And when it comes to blatant, persistent disobedience in the church, the discipline is not the death penalty, but rather removal from church membership. That’s one of the accountability structures in the church, and something the church will need to practice from time to time. It’s never pleasant. But it

shows that we take obedience to the Word of God so seriously that those who rebel against God will need to be cut off from His people.

And when anyone is removed from membership, our hope is always that they will repent and return to the fellowship.

Be Strong and Courageous

The last thing these Israelite officers say is the same thing the Lord had told Joshua 3 times earlier in the chapter. “Only be strong and courageous.” Again, how encouraging this would have been for Joshua. He has heard this from the Lord. He now hears it from the people as well. They are for him. They are cheering him on. They want him to lead well. And they are promising to follow.

But how well did they actually follow? Well, in some ways we can say that they did pretty well. They did go into the land and conquer the land. The 2 and a half tribes lived up to their commitment to fight alongside their brothers.

“At that time Joshua summoned the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, and said to them, “You have kept all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you and have obeyed my voice in all that I have commanded you. You have not forsaken your brothers these many days, down to this day, but have been careful to keep the charge of the LORD your God. And now the LORD your God has given rest to your brothers, as he promised them. Therefore turn and go to your tents in the land where your possession lies, which Moses the servant of the LORD gave you on the other side of the Jordan.” (Joshua 22:1–4, ESV)

But there were also ways that the Israelites fell short of what they had promised. They did not fully obey the Lord or Joshua. Even in their first battle, when they were taking Jericho, the clear instruction was to destroy everything. They weren’t supposed to take anything for themselves. But Achan did just that (chapter 7). He took some of the things for himself—a beautiful cloak and some silver and gold. And he was put to death because of his disobedience.

There are other places where we read of Israel as a whole failing to follow all that the Lord had commanded them to do. As I already said, they were supposed to destroy everything and drive out all the inhabitants of the land. But they didn’t always do that. They allowed some of those inhabitants to remain in the land, which might sound like a compassionate thing to do. But it was, in

fact, dangerous—those inhabitants would be an ongoing temptation to idolatry. And it was also disobedient, because they weren't doing all that the Lord had commanded of them.

So these words at the end of Joshua 1 we have to take with a grain of salt. We can appreciate their intentions, but we also have to remember that they didn't totally come through on these commitments.

This is a reminder to us, too, that talk is cheap. It's easy to make promises to God, or to church leaders, or to your spouse, or kids, or fellow members in the church. But are you following through on those commitments? Are you a man or woman of your word?

Of course, we need God's grace to sustain us and motivate us. We can't succeed in our own strength. So let's be mindful of that when we make promises and as we seek to live up to those promises.

Rest

Let's close with a few thoughts about rest. This appears in our text in verses 13 and 15. Do you see how the land is spoken of in terms of rest? "The Lord your God is providing you a place of rest and will give you this land." This Promised Land is a place of rest. They will have rest from war. They will enjoy the plenty of this land flowing with milk and honey.

The concept of rest is introduced early in the Bible. In Genesis 2 the Lord rests from His work of creation. That pattern of rest on the seventh day continues on in the life of Israel. In the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, the fourth commandment reads, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God."

Just as God worked for six days and rested on the seventh, so also the Israelites are to work for six days and then rest. They are to keep the Sabbath holy. It is to be set aside as a special day, a day of rest. Then in Exodus 31 we see that the Sabbath is a sign of the covenant. Just as circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham, the Sabbath is the sign of the Mosaic covenant (God's covenant that came through Moses to the Israelites). And the fulfillment of that sign in the Old Testament was the Promised Land. God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and gave them the Promised Land as their inheritance. In Deuteronomy 12 Moses refers to the Promised Land as "the rest"

and “the inheritance that the Lord your God is giving you” (v. 9). Also in Psalm 95 we read that some were not able to enter God’s rest, meaning God did not let them enter the Promised Land because of their hard hearts. We see also here in Joshua 1 that the land is referred to in terms of rest.

So this is the significance of the Sabbath rest in the Old Testament. God rested on the seventh day. Israel was to rest on the seventh day as a sign of God’s covenant with them. And their observance of the Sabbath pointed to God’s great work in delivering them from Egypt and taking them to the Promised Land, where they would have rest from their enemies.

There’s a problem, though. The Promised Land did not provide the peace and rest that the Israelites were hoping for. Not because there was anything wrong with God’s gift, but because there was a problem in the Israelites’ hearts. They were sinners, just like we all are. And they ended up squandering their inheritance. They rebelled against God and worshipped other gods. They did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. And eventually, because of their sin, God cast them out of the Promised Land. After 70 years some of them were able to return to the land, but the ultimate rest was still unfulfilled.

When we fast-forward to the New Testament we read of Jesus saying,

“I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:7-8).

The ultimate rest, the ultimate Promised Land, is to be found in the Person of Jesus Christ. If you desperately desire rest (and I’m not just talking about a good night’s sleep, although that’s nice too) . . . if you realize a deep craving in your soul for rest, then come to Jesus. Find rest in His finished work on the cross. You know, there’s no work you can do to earn a right standing with God. There’s absolutely nothing you can do to make yourself good enough . . . good enough for God, good enough for yourself, good enough for anybody’s expectations. But if you put your faith in Jesus Christ, then all your sins will be covered and all of His goodness will be counted as yours.

Listen to His call:

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am

gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28–30, ESV)